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CBS's Morning Eye-Opener

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Last summer's inspection of the "CBS Morning News" coincided with the network's protracted competition among several ladies auditioning to replace Diane Sawyer as the sidekick of Bill Kurtis and weatherman Steve Baskerville. The show was then third in the three-network competition among two-hour morning programs, well behind NBC's "Today Show" and out of hailing distance behind ABC's first-place "Good Morning, America." Perhaps predictably, I thought the "Morning News" the best of the crop, notwithstanding the fact that Robin Young, trying out for Ms. Sawyer's post, was not atop her game.

Since then, the network has designated Phyllis George as permanent replacement for Ms. Sawyer, now plying her reportorial skills on the "60 Minutes" squad; "permanent" in this context connoting the network's intention to stay with Ms. George awhile to see if the ratings improve. Some cosmetic changes have also been made on the show to open it up; "open it up" in this context being biliously interpreted by many in the pencil press as connoting the network's inference that "GMA" and "Today" were outpointing CBS because they didn't frighten morning viewers into thinking very often. Inasmuch as Ms. George had incautiously omitted to acquire working-press credentials similar to Ms. Sawyer's (10 years topped off by assignment as a CBS State Department correspondent) before leaving CBS Sports' "NFL Today" to join the "Morning News," many inferred from the combination of the changes that the program was undergoing a lobotomy in hopes of improving its ratings.

The ratings for the week of March 11-17 showed the "Morning News" with a 15% share of sets in use between 7 and 9 a.m. "Today" clocked 20%, and "GMA" registered 23%. On a relatively crisis-free day, more than 21 minutes of the program (about a quarter of its actual running time) was devoted to hard news and its implications. If one assumes, as I am inclined to do, that the generality of public interest in Oscars presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences confers upon the awards ceremonies a de facto status of newsworthiness that they do not, de jure, deserve, then the total time expended on hard news and related commentary rises to a little more than 34 minutes. That is about 42% of the 80-plus minutes during which the ostensibly 120-minute show actually delivers information (as opposed to teasers of upcoming items, commercials, station breaks, etc.).

That is a creditable performance, if the function of a news operation is defined to include the obligation to relieve the public's curiosity along with the responsibility to uplift its consciousness about great issues of the day. While I am prone to suspect that TV news producers relish "news events" such as the Academy Awards precisely because their appeal to dimwits in the audience far surpasses the appeal of the Geneva arms talks, say, I do not think it unseemly for those news producers to display the same eagerness to serve the dimwits that they are exhorted to muster in service of the intelligentsia.

Especially when, as was the case on the morning after the Academy Awards, the "Morning News" coverage of the more portentous events of the day was thorough and detailed. Bill Kurtis moderated six minutes or so of discussion by former CIA Director William Colby, retired Gen. Edward Atkeson and "Puzzle Palace" author James Bamford on the issue of military intelligence-gathering raised by the Soviet murder of Maj. Arthur Nicholson in East Germany the preceding Sunday.

Mr. Colby cogently distinguished between intelligence activities and espionage, freely conceding that Maj. Nicholson had been engaged in what Mr. Colby said was acceptable collection of information. Gen. Atkeson usefully averred that Soviet observers of our military activities in West Germany are suffered without muggings or homicidal interference to exploit the same provisions of the World War II treaties between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. that Maj. Nicholson was exercising when he was shot down. Mr. Bamford explained that while spy-in-the-sky satellites can indeed photograph small objects on earth and readily detect tanks, they provide only intermittent surveillance and are plagued by clouds and rain, the reason that Maj. Nicholson was taking snapshots in East Germany in the first place.

The same cogency was notable in Terence Smith's Washington bureau colloquy with three members of Congress variously minded on the MX missile funding controversy. And Mr. Kurtis's interrogation of syndicated TV film critics Roger Ebert (Chicago Sun Times) and Gene Siskel (Chicago Tribune) about Oscar night yielded five minutes of the rewarding badinage for which Mr. Ebert, looking like a bleary barn owl after being up all night in L.A., and Mr. Siskel, chipper as a squirrel in Chicago in the morning, are justly renowned.

That left Ms. George's contributions, which I admit I was prepared to dislike. I do not hold against the lady her youthful

indiscretion of being Miss America (1971)—she can live that down, I think—but anyone, male or female, capable of reduction to tears of helpless rage by that oaf, Jimmy the Greek, as she was on "NFL Today," starts out with a burden of proof of entitlement to be taken as a serious person. Furthermore, her installment in "Women of Influence" on the "Morning News" segment I scrutinized was Mary Hatwood Futrell, the shrill president of the National Education Association whose strident endorsements of Walter Mondale contributed not a little to Ronald Reagan's reelection. I thought Ms. George's work was entirely professional, and for the first time ever I liked Ms. Futrell.

I thought the "Morning News" pretty good when I saw it last summer, and I think it's still good now. I could do without the awkward couple who reported on chicken-fried steak for five excruciating minutes, but Pat Collins knows entertainment and Betsy Ashton is a capable consumer advocate. At seven in the morning, that is probably enough.